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From “Discourses of Sobriety” to Deadpan Comedy: Christopher Guest’s Musical Trilogy

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From "Discourses of Sobriety" to Deadpan Comedy: Christopher Guest's Musical Trilogy

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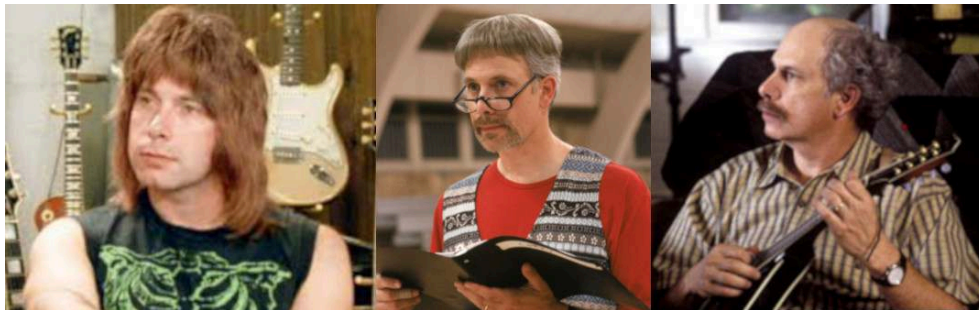
The idea was, "Wouldn't it be fun to do a movie where people got this right for a change?"
Harry Shearer, aka bass player "Derek Smalls" of Spinal Tap (Muir 2004: 25)

- ¹ The entertainment industry has long been fascinated by the "truth" behind popular music. Indeed, the first feature length talking film, *The Jazz Singer* (Crosland 1927), starred Al Jolson as Jakie Rabinowitz, a young man struggling to reconcile his Jewish identity to his success at performing in blackface to white audiences. Since then, there has been an endless stream of movies about music. Some are explicitly biographical, with actors cast as iconic musicians: e.g., *The Glenn Miller Story* (Mann 1954), *The Buddy Holly Story* (Rash 1978), *Ray* (Hackford 2004), *Walk the Line* (Mangold 2005) and *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Singer 2018). Others, like Elvis Presley's many fictional but transparently promotional movies, or the Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night* (Lester 1964) and *Help!* (Lester 1965), show the artists performing their own work.¹ These latter examples are not documentaries, but these films are undeniably of documentary interest for anyone trying to learn more about the artists. More conventional documentaries assume the form of concert footage interspersed with interviews and off-stage antics, such as *Don't Look Back* (Pennebaker 1967), *Woodstock* (Wadleigh 1970), *The Weavers: Wasn't That a Time!* (Brown 1982) or *No Direction Home* (Scorsese 2005). All these movies, whatever their generic status, are invested in the idea that image can add to the musical experience. For Bill Nichols (1991), the indexical quality of the image and sound recording

is less in the unassailable authenticity of the bond between image and referent than in the *impression of authenticity* it conveys to the viewer. Even if the indexicality is fabricated—as certain trompe l'œil techniques of set design, lighting, and perspective or the computer-based technique of digital sampling can do—the effect or the impression of authenticity can remain just as powerful (150).

- 2 The satirical films of Christopher Guest offer an idiosyncratic approach to the question of how to bring music to the screen. Working as writer, director or actor in *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), *Waiting for Guffman* (1996), and *A Mighty Wind* (2003), Guest has created fake documentaries about the music world that put the act of reporting in the foreground.² More than mere parodies, these films assume a critical distance that goes beyond the immediate fun of spoofing. Sometimes referred to as "mockumentaries" — a term that Guest himself disavows (Muir 2004: 4) — these fake documentaries synthesize a broad spectrum of recent music history. They include folk, rock and community theater traditions, and they illustrate what Nichols described as "the notion of the 'history lesson' as a central aspect of documentary" (1991: 29). At the same time, these films are conceived and marketed as comic entertainment, and thus might appear to be at odds with documentary's supposed affiliation with the "discourses of sobriety" (29) and its implied "strong and direct connection between the cinematic record and 'reality'" (Roscoe & Hight 2001: 6).³

Figure 1. From left to right: Christopher Guest in *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), *Waiting for Guffman* (1996), *A Mighty Wind* (2003)



Sources, left to right: <https://happybday.to/Christopher-Guest?page=2>; <https://www.tvguide.com/celebrities/christopher-guest/144775/>; http://exclaim.ca/film/article/mighty_wind-christopher_guest.

- 3 What makes these films pertinent rewritings of music history? Clearly it is more than a matter of conventional research or a piling up of facts, or an exercise of *film à clef*.⁴ Guest is obviously very knowledgeable about his subjects but it is arguably the liberty he takes in inserting fiction into a factual context that allows him to reshape received narratives more effectively than a strictly literal approach would allow. He relieves the audience of any burden of thinking that it already knows the history of a particular event or performer — he destabilizes familiar stories about music — and thereby creates an opening for new perspectives. In the process, he also helps redefine the documentary genre. As Roscoe & Hight (2001) have observed,
- Mock-documentary arguably provides the greatest challenge in terms of what documentary claims to be. It provides a direct contest to the truth claims made by documentary on the basis of the power of the image, and its referentiality. It takes up the ground of the reflexive and performative documentary, furthering the challenge to any assumed fact/fiction dichotomy, and extending the range of representational strategies available to filmmakers. It deliberately raises issues about the nature of representations and the claims which documentaries present (Roscoe & Hight 182).
- 4 Although this article makes no claim to being exhaustive, it will, after a brief introduction to Guest and his methods, consider several signature aspects of his "musical trilogy." These include skepticism about the idea of authenticity,⁵ particularly

about how the story of music is often dubiously cast in relation to a sense of "home." *This Is Spinal Tap*, *Waiting for Guffman* and *A Mighty Wind* depict very different musical worlds, but they are united in their fascination with retelling the past, challenging received ideas and narratives, and reshaping aesthetic boundaries.

- 5 At first blush, discourses of sobriety might seem antithetical to comic entertainment. But Guest recodes sobriety by adding layers of irony. His characters hold forth in interviews with great earnestness while the camera scrupulously documents absurd or incongruous situations. Of course, straight-faced or "deadpan" humor has a long history in cinema, most famously in Buster Keaton's films, where jokes or sight-gags need not be explicitly acknowledged — on the contrary, the comedy is enhanced by playing it straight.⁶ By bringing a similar approach to fake documentary, Guest and his collaborators satisfy a fundamental generic convention, described by Roscoe & Hight (2001), of appearing to show "real people, places and events" in a manner suggesting that "events we see on screen would have happened, as they happened, even if the filmmaker had not been present" (21). Although the validity of this convention can be questioned or contested, Guest chooses to respect it. And, by doing so, he neatly refashions the "discourses of sobriety" into discourses of deadpan. Using humor, he suggests that the survival of folk, rock and community theater traditions will not rely on roots or authenticity. Instead, the artists must engage in a process of reinvention.

Guest and his Methods

- 6 Christopher Guest is a study in contrasts. Born in New York City in 1948, in his youth he knew folk music circles well, developed a keen interest in bluegrass, and as a teenager played music with Arlo Guthrie. His mother was an American of Russian Jewish origins and his father was a British diplomat who later became Baron Haden-Guest, a title that his son eventually inherited, thus making Guest the first (and almost certainly the last) American "folkie" to have a seat in the House of Lords (Grant 2004).
- 7 In his early twenties, he began acting and writing comedy and made a name for himself with the *National Lampoon Radio Hour* and eventually *Saturday Night Live*. In addition to the musical films under consideration here, he has acted, directed or co-written other films, among the best-known being *Best in Show* (2000), *For Your Consideration* (2006) and *Mascots* (2016), which also use fake documentary techniques.⁷
- 8 Of course, Guest did not invent this genre. Fake documentary goes back at least as far as Luis Buñuel's *Land Without Bread* (*Las Hurdes*) (1933). Orson Welles famously spliced fake newsreel footage into *Citizen Kane* (1941). Even at this relatively early stage in film history, directors appropriated formal devices of journalism in order to enhance an entertainment medium with an ersatz facticity. Generic borders were permeable. This was, after all, an era when Leni Riefenstahl's documentaries tested the limits of aestheticized reporting (Sontag 1980: 73-105). The Moffitt Library Archive at the University of California at Berkeley houses more than sixty "Fake and Mock Documentaries: Documentary Parodies, Hoaxes and Appropriations," and the total grows if one also includes "Shockumentaries, Mondo Films, and Exploitation Ethnography." It is a subject rich in epistemological nuance, but it is safe to say that Guest is working within a tradition.

- 9 As for the specific genre of fake music documentaries, there are several notable precedents. *A Hard Day's Night* (Lester 1964) was not about the Beatles so much as about "The Beatles," a fantasy projection of the group at the height of their fame. This difference is pithily summed up by Ringo Starr's staged press conference retort, when he was asked if he was a mod or a rocker: "I'm a mocker." Eric Idle and Gary Weis' *All You Need is Cash* (sometimes referred to simply as *The Rutles*) (1978), pushed the documentary approach much further.⁸ But the significant difference of *This Is Spinal Tap*, *Waiting for Guffman* and *A Mighty Wind* is that their targets are not so readily identifiable or reducible to one famous group or another; rather, the films blur or multiply the personalities, and the result is to produce a broader picture, and to tell a larger story of the music.

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- 10 *This is Spinal Tap*⁹ pretends to be a documentary about the American tour of a British rock band promoting their latest album, "Smell the Glove." The album's success is thwarted by its misogynistic cover and the record label's marketing whims. Concerts get cancelled, and the group plays to smaller and smaller venues, endures public humiliations and personal squabbles, till the band totally implodes and the remaining members find themselves sharing the stage at a theme park with a puppet show. *Waiting for Guffman* shows the making of a small-town musical in the fictional setting of Blaine, Missouri. The show, "Red, White and Blaine," celebrates the town's sesquicentennial by retelling highlights of Blaine's history. Under the influence of the dubiously charismatic director Corky St. Clair, a talentless group of amateurs becomes convinced that they are one step away from taking their musical to Broadway. Lastly, *A Mighty Wind* tells the story of a folk reunion concert in honor of the recently deceased Irving Steinbloom, erstwhile godfather (à la Harold Leventhal¹⁰) to a generation of folk music performers. In recounting the development of three fake groups and their different styles, it shows the tendency of American folk music to mythologize itself even as it gets down to business.¹¹
- 11 *This Is Spinal Tap* has been recognized as "a landmark within the mock-documentary form" (Roscoe & Hight 2001: 201) and, in fact, some viewers of its initial screenings did not grasp that it was about a fake musical group (Plantinga 1998: 320). This documentary realism is surely due in part to the film's improvisational methods, which apply to Guest's later work, too, and which are atypical in the film industry. In the preparation stage, Guest and his co-writers research his subjects for story arc and produce detailed backgrounds of the characters.¹² But, unusually, they do not write in advance what the characters will say. "The final result is a lengthy script that 'looks like a script,' according to the actor John Michael Higgins, except that it 'doesn't have dialogue in it. There are descriptions of what happens, but no lines are given to the actors'" (Muir 2004: 58). The actual shooting of the film is fairly brief and intense: three to four weeks of actors improvising in front of the camera based on their situation and back-story. Then begins a much longer process, lasting six to nine months, during which Guest edits this raw material. For *Waiting for Guffman*, for instance, John Kenneth Muir notes that, "more than fifty-eight hours of footage had to be vetted and assembled into a coherent, tight story lasting approximately ninety minutes" (2004: 108). In this respect, Guest's method mimics to a large degree the process of conventional

documentary, in which the filmmaker chooses the subjects and sets up the shoots, but depends on others to generate much of the content. The larger meaning of this content, however, is selected and shaped later, in the editing process. "Every edit or cut is a step forward in an argument" (Nichols 1991: 29).

- 12 Supporting the improvised interviews and character dialogue is a sophisticated array of documentary visuals, such as fake archival still photos, newspaper clippings and old album covers, all contributing to the "B-roll" effect. Jerky handheld cameras capture supposedly unguarded moments; "old" black-and-white footage is fabricated to refer to non-existent television shows from the past. For *This Is Spinal Tap*, Peter Smokler, who had worked as a camera man on the Rolling Stones documentary *Gimme Shelter* (Maysles and Zwerin 1970), was hired as cinematographer in order to achieve a similar atmosphere (Muir 2004: 27). Conversely, *A Mighty Wind* incorporates real black-and-white archival footage of Greenwich Village folk singers to create verisimilitude. Lastly, it should be noted that *Waiting for Guffman* and *A Mighty Wind* both center on the production of a particular musical show, and that in each case, songs were actually performed and filmed, live, in front of an audience. These sequences are tantamount to real documentary footage, but of a fake entertainment event. The traditional fact/fiction dichotomy is vigorously challenged, and the truth of what is represented exists according to a different code of referentiality, one that does not depend on the historical reality of the performers.¹³ It is not "authentic" — at least not in a literalist manner that favors fact over fiction. But is Guest pointing to another kind of authenticity?

Never Mind the Authenticity, or the Quest for Home

- 13 In an essay called "'Authenticity,' or the Lesson of Little Tree," Henry Louis Gates Jr. tells the story of how "the great black jazz trumpeter Roy Eldridge once made a wager with the critic Leonard Feather that he could distinguish white musicians from black ones — blindfolded" (1991: 1). Feather accepted the challenge, and they played a game of "drop the needle." According to Gates, "Feather duly dropped the needle onto a variety of record albums whose titles and soloists were concealed from the trumpeter. More than half the time, Eldridge guessed wrong" (1991: 1). This anecdote reveals how much music is often invested in ideas of authenticity, and how perilous this investment is.¹⁴
- 14 Christopher Guest's musical trilogy directly confronts the problem by challenging received narratives that place an emphasis on origins. From Cecil Sharp's (1907) pioneering work in the English folk song revival to Alan Lomax's field recordings (Szwed 2010) to Georgina Boyes' (1993) conceptualization of an "imagined village," the idea of origins, or a sense of home, has influenced understandings of musical authenticity.¹⁵ But the origins and homes of Guest's musical artists, and thus their supposed authentic identities, can be difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain.
- 15 A title like *This Is Spinal Tap* seems to promise the answer to the question, "Who is Spinal Tap?" But the film is at pains to show that it is not a simple matter. Despite the sympathetic and serious conversations with their interviewer Marty DiBergi played by director Rob Reiner, in a direct lampoon of Martin Scorsese's over-earnest on-camera appearances in his rock documentary *The Last Waltz* (Roscoe & Hight 2001: 129), the truth remains elusive. The not-so-clever members of the group are in fact rendered

more complicated by their cluelessness, and much of the interest of the story originates in witnessing their protean identities, watching them try on different styles and masks in increasingly desperate efforts to find themselves.¹⁶ The history of the band is full of name changes — when David of "The Creatures" joined Nigel of "The Lovely Lads" to form "The Originals" who became "The New Originals" and then "The Thamesmen" before metamorphosing into "Spinal Tap." The band experiences many personnel changes, too, with a running gag about how drummers seemed destined to die in grisly or mysterious circumstances. Most significantly, the accompanying soundtrack documents their changes in musical styles, from the African-American R & B inflected "Gimme Some Money" to the psychedelic "Listen to the Flower People" to their current heavy metal theme song "Gonna Rock You Tonight," which is temporarily abandoned in the chaos of the "Smell the Glove" tour, for the Celtic revival of "Stonehenge" or the aimless noodling of "Jazz Odyssey." Amid this frenetic activity (who is Spinal Tap?), they make a pilgrimage to Elvis Presley's grave, as if in hope that a dose of rock and roll roots might rub off on them. According to band member David St. Hubbins, however, this visit provides "too much fucking perspective." Elsewhere, in an interview about their origins, Nigel and David sing a portion of the first song they wrote together when they were children back in Squatney (the pun of the name only reinforces the sense of transience), a train song called, "All the Way Home." Even then, it seems, they were singing about a quest to return.¹⁷ But, as the film makes amply clear, for Spinal Tap, there is no going back.

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- ¹⁶ *Waiting for Guffman* traces another kind of trajectory. In the literal sense, the residents of Blaine, Missouri, are already home, and their musical production celebrates that fact: the sesquicentennial of the founding of the town and the dramatization of its history, notably its rise as a "stool capital" of America and a visit by extraterrestrials. Their show, "Red, White and Blaine," is an exercise in entertainment as local boosterism. But, emerging out of this history is another one: the cast members' collective dream that their performance will impress New York theater impresario Mort Guffman, who will then take the show to Broadway. It is an absurd dream, but it repeats a received narrative of musical theater — the discovery of provincials and their launch on a bigger stage — which has been told countless times, perhaps most famously in the Hollywood adaptation of the musical *Babes In Arms* (Berkeley 1939), in which Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland put on a show in a barn in their home town and are discovered by a big-time producer.
- ¹⁷ Thus, in contrast with Marty DiBergi and Spinal Tap's dubious quest to go back, these performers are struggling to get out. They are rooted in Blaine, Missouri, but the fake documentary interviews suggest that, in various ways, they do not feel completely at home with the lives that this place offers them, and they believe that a better, truer home awaits them elsewhere.¹⁸ Leaving Blaine will be the expression of their most authentic selves. Unfortunately, this faith is unfounded, because *Waiting for Guffman* makes it abundantly clear that "Red, White and Blaine" is a doomed venture. The performers possess meager talents, and their director Corky (played by Guest himself) is a deluded fabulist. Of course, Guffman does not show up for their show, no more than

Godot shows up for Vladimir and Estragon. In this rewriting of popular musical theater myth, there is no getting out.

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- 18 *A Mighty Wind* takes a more intimate approach, as befits folk music. Of the three genres, folk is the most heavily invested in the idea of authenticity, of celebrating the local, of singing about home or an organic community that everyone can share.¹⁹ Often these merge into a generally warm sense of "hominess." In contrast with *This Is Spinal Tap*, where a single group donned various styles, *A Mighty Wind* shows various groups doggedly celebrating a similar style. They are all supposedly at home on the same stage. "The Folksmen" (performed by Guest, McKean and Shearer, who were the core of Spinal Tap) recall the earnest ebullience of The Kingston Trio or the Tripjacks; "The New Main Street Singers" capture the saccharine optimism of Up With People; while "Mitch and Mickey" occupy an ambiguous moody space akin to Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, or Peter, Paul and Mary. As in his earlier work, however, Guest avoids direct parody. Instead, he targets the pieties of solidarity and shared values that underpin conventional histories of the genre. The Folksmen, for all their appeal to community, are shown to be petty and smug in their attitude towards The New Main Street Singers who, despite their aggressive wholesomeness, include neglected children and an ex-porn actress. The love story between Mitch and Mickey is revealed to have been disastrous, and nowadays when Mitch sings about "goin' home," it is in a motel room next to his prescription bottles, and his only accompaniment is the intrusive sound of anonymous sex next door.

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- 19 In Guest's retelling, folk music's attachment to continuity is depicted as positively paralyzing. The performers in *A Mighty Wind* forever repeat the same formula, even as the world has left them behind. They embody a wind whose might was spent long ago. The only character who seems to grasp this is the mentally unstable Mitch, who announces, "There's a deception here." In comparison, the stylistic promiscuity of Spinal Tap or the naïve dreaming of Blaine's community theater at least display a readiness to experiment, an openness to alternatives. But the folk mission to preserve is here shown as an exercise in complacency.
- 20 Thus, in each of these films, Guest challenges key assumptions about musical authenticity. For Spinal Tap, there is no going back. For the Blaine Community Players, there is no getting out. And for the folk performers of *A Mighty Wind*, there is no standing still.

Life after Authenticity, or the Process of Reinvention

- 21 So, it could seem, the characters in these fake documentaries are trapped in their own contradictions. The received narratives of authenticity that they have embraced are

shown to be false. One can ask: after these acts of debunking, what next? Where does Guest leave the viewer?

- 22 A preliminary answer can be found by returning to Gates' aforementioned essay, "The Lesson of Little Tree." Although Gates' main focus is on the written word, his observations can also be applied to documentary film. The title of his essay refers to a 1976 bestseller, *The Education of Little Tree*, which was supposedly the memoir of a ten-year-old orphan who learned the ways of his Native American ancestors from his Cherokee grandparents (Carter 1976). It was critically acclaimed by book critics and endorsed by some Native Americans as an inspiring book, attuned to nature and history, and it was recommended for schoolchildren. Oprah Winfrey later touted it on her website. Eventually, though, it was revealed that the contents were actually fiction, and rather inconveniently written by Asa Earl Carter, a former Ku Klux Klan member and rabid anti-Semite, and probable ghostwriter of Alabama Governor George Wallace's 1963 speech which is now largely remembered for the slogan "Segregation now ... segregation tomorrow ... segregation forever" (Gates 1991: 27). Seldom have the sentimental excesses related to the concept of authenticity been more starkly exposed.
- 23 Gates points out, however, that fake works like *The Education of Little Tree* are not unusual. The history of slave narratives has comparable fakes and these fakes have influenced the real examples, including undisputed classics like the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Far from being disposable material, some fakes might still have something to tell us. Gates concludes with the affirmation: "What, then, of the vexed concept of authenticity? To borrow from Samuel Goldwyn's theory of sincerity, authenticity remains essential: once you can fake that, you've got it made" (30).²⁰
- 24 I would argue that Christopher Guest's musical trilogy embraces a similar attitude about fakes. Guest's films suggest that even if a literalist authenticity is a conceptual dead-end, these fake entertainers still have something to tell us about the survival of their musical genres, by depicting a process of reinvention.
- 25 Many narratives about "authentic" music have involved an attempt to protect it. As Iain Chambers (1985) observed, "the most arbitrary distinctions [are] rapidly drawn up into fiercely patrolled aesthetic boundaries" (21). Material constraints inevitably come into play, too. Elizabeth Outka (2009) has described a problematic "commodified authentic" which Beth Bloom (2010) has summed up as "the paradox that while the commercialization of authenticity makes it accessible to the masses, its resistance to commodification is precisely what constitutes the authentic's appeal" (150). Guest's work shows a keen awareness of these issues as his fake musical groups repeatedly test the limits of aesthetic or material boundaries. In fact, this errancy proves crucial to their survival.
- 26 Spinal Tap cannot "go back" but *This Is Spinal Tap* rewrites the received (and sentimentalized) narrative of rock and roll roots with its merciless depiction of the importance of popularity. The group is nowhere if it is not on the charts. Only with an audience can Spinal Tap authenticate itself and, to underline the point, the film ends with a *deus ex machina*. Just when it seems that the disastrous American tour has destroyed the band, utterly and forever, news arrives that their album is climbing the charts in Japan. Thus, the surprise happy ending, which shows the lads from Squatney pumping out power chords to throngs of enthusiastic Asians. Spinal Tap has found a home — for now — in "Kobe Hall, Tokyo." More than an unexpected twist or a parting

joke, it is a lucid telling of the evolution of rock music, its historical resilience and phoenix-like ability to go global.

- 27 In *Waiting for Guffman*, although the players cannot "get out" and take their performance to Broadway, there are suggestions that they reinvent themselves in other ways. First of all, the local audience adores the show. According to Roscoe & Hight, who see *Guffman* as a "docu-soap," there is "a kind of pathos to the fact that such a terrible show can elicit feelings of excitement and recognition for the people of Blaine" (2001: 126). But a less literal reading might see something more than pathos: for instance, the liberating possibilities of camp. Corky St. Clair's affected manner is obviously a flaming camp cliché, and on its own a more limited joke, but, arguably, the musical performance of the entire troop might also qualify as camp.²¹ And this might legitimize their efforts. According to Susan Sontag (1980),

In naïve, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails. Of course, not all seriousness that fails can be redeemed as Camp. Only that which has the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve (59).

- 28 Although one can question Sontag's attachment to the "naïve and pure" (Ross 1999: 316), there are several layers of intentionality here: the Blaine players' efforts, and Guest's. "Red White and Blaine" takes itself very seriously indeed, and mixes the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve. If *Guffman* was only satire, a film viewer's judgment would be fairly simple — at times, indeed, the ridiculous depictions border on patronizing — but, on the other hand, it is entirely possible for a viewer to enjoy, for instance, the musical number about extraterrestrial visitation, "Nothing Ever Happens On Mars," for different reasons from the fictional Blaine audience. The goofy lyrics and creaky special effects do not detract from the entertainment: on the contrary, they enhance it, and become a source of camp charm. This strategy allows Guest to negotiate the delicate problem of how to devote so much of his film to a performance that is unambiguously bad. The film's epilogue, "Three Months Later," further illustrates the distinction. Although some of the players have managed to get out of Blaine, literally (Corky has opened a shop in Manhattan, the Albertsons have gone to Los Angeles, Dr. Pearl to Miami Beach), they are as hapless as they ever were, but, at the same time, just as hopeful and pursuing their dreams in music. Guest seems to be suggesting that authenticity is less a passive inheritance (who you are) than an active process (what you do). It is performative.
- 29 In *A Mighty Wind*, some of the folk musicians manage to escape the ambient paralysis, and authenticate themselves, by acting on another level of interiority. This is an altogether different direction from the means used by Spinal Tap or the Blaine Community Players. At the end of *Wind*, for instance, Mark Shubb of the Folkmen (Harry Shearer) announces, "I came to a realization that I was, and am, a blonde female folksinger trapped in the body of a bald male folksinger, and I had to let *me* out or I would die." Henceforth, he will perform as a woman, a change that the Folkmen must incorporate into their act. The bass-singing, cross-dressing Shubb is obviously another source of deadpan humor, but his transformation also underlines how much the Folkmen can change in order to stay true to who they think they are. The film also includes moments when the music itself effects the change. The old songs, if performed well, still retain the power to entertain and acquire new meanings, and this, in fact, can rescue folk music from irrelevance or complacency. Critic Tim Grierson (2004)

describes one such moment between Mitch and Mickey, played by Eugene Levy and Catherine O'Hara, as they rehearse for the tribute concert.

This moment [...] is shockingly poignant, natural, and blessedly free of easy laughs. Suddenly, the song takes on a sadness that was missing 35 years before. Rather than going for a potshot, Levy and O'Hara [...] approach a melancholy and regret that is truly beautiful. His tentative playing and her nervous singing only bring out the heartache in the tune's hope of a happily ever after. The song's very title is a spoof on the hopelessly romantic ideal of most ballads. (And lines like 'Though an ocean of tears divides us / Let the bridge of our love span the sea' are priceless in their eye-rolling earnestness.) But the genius of this scene is how those clichéd words now carry so much meaning. When they reach the moment when they used to pause to kiss, there's real, unexpected feeling (cited in Muir: 185).

- 30 Thus, the mighty wind actually still moves, sometimes. This sense of possibility is shared by all three films. Though Spinal Tap cannot get back, or the Blaine Community Players get out, or the various folk acts of *A Mighty Wind* get free of tradition, they manage, nonetheless, to seek a home and authenticate themselves by other means. These entertainers, in their own manner, can be redeemed by performance.²²

Conclusion

- 31 The interest of Christopher Guest's fake documentaries goes beyond their achievement as comic entertainment. These films engage in an ongoing conversation about music history. As Guest's collaborator Harry Shearer remarked about the early stages of inventing Spinal Tap, "The idea was, wouldn't it be fun to do a movie where people got this right for a change?" (Muir 2004: 25). From the beginning, there was always an intention to do more than make jokes about the characters, or simply tweak received narratives about passing fashions. There was an investment in documenting musical history, in "getting it right."
- 32 The success of *This Is Spinal Tap* inspired fake music documentaries by directors like Rusty Cundieff's *Fear of a Black Hat* (1994) and Bruce McDonald's *Hard Core Logo* (1996), about hip hop and punk, respectively. The afterlife of Guest's films has broken down the fact/fiction dichotomy in other media, too, most conspicuously in Ricky Gervais' *The Office*, in its various international productions. Gervais has described Guest as "the biggest single influence on my work" (Downing 2006). Moreover, the group Spinal Tap (Guest, McKean and Shearer, performing in character) have returned to stage and television to perform real concerts in front of real audiences, released new music that has charted higher in the Billboard ratings than many well-known real artists. They were also the subject of a short, hybrid documentary for television.²³ In 2009, 25 years after the release of the first documentary, the band released a new CD,²⁴ and performed live with the Folksmen (also Guest, McKean and Shearer, in character) serving as their incongruous opening act. In a similar, though more limited fashion, the cast of *A Mighty Wind* performed concerts in character after the film's release, and the film itself has been credited with re-educating a post 9/11 America about the folk revival (Mitchell 2006: 595).
- 33 Guest's work implies a functional approach in which authenticity is less a passive cultural inheritance than an active process of self-invention. He has also helped to expand the possibilities of documentary form, by showing how the pleasures of entertainment and deadpan humor, mixed with music, do not compete with

documentary's discourses of sobriety as much as complement them. Just as there are many ways to tell a joke, there are many ways to be serious.

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NOTES

1. The Beatles' last film, *Let it Be* (Lindsay-Hogg 1970), can be considered a more conventional "fly-on-the-wall" documentary. Without fictional characters or interviews, it relies only on footage of the group at work.
2. Rob Reiner directed *This Is Spinal Tap*, with Guest acting and contributing dialogue and music. For *Waiting for Guffman* and *Like a Mighty Wind*, Guest was director, while also acting, contributing music, and sharing writing credits with Eugene Levy.
3. This affiliation is necessarily contested. Nichols refers to viewers navigating "between a recognition of historical reality and their cognition of an argument about it" (28), while Roscoe & Hight (2001) explore epistemological assumptions of documentary tradition and how mock documentary engages in a subversion of factuality.
4. See, for instance, *Dreamgirls* (Condon 2006), about an imaginary group very much like the Supremes, or *The Rose* (Rydell 1979), whose fictional heroine resembles Janis Joplin.
5. Specifically a literal-minded authenticity based on facts, origins or purity. This article will rely primarily on Henry Louis Gates' appreciation of fakery in constructing authenticity (Gates 1991), which will be developed later in the discussion, and shares Georgina Boyes' view that authenticity is "reproduced and negotiated" (1993: 293).
6. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the first use of "deadpan" (or "dead pan"), in the sense of soberly "playing a rôle" to *The New York Times* in 1928.
7. These non-musical examples depict the world of competitive dog breeding, film promotion and commercial mascots, respectively.
8. In addition to influencing *This Is Spinal Tap*, this film is certainly one of the templates for recent comedies like *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (Kasdan 2007).

9. The official spelling of the name of the band is *Spīñal Tap*, with an odd umlaut over the letter *n* and a letter *i* without a dot. The original film title uses this spelling, too. This discussion, like most media on the subject, conventionalizes the spelling.
10. Leventhal managed Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, The Weavers et al.
11. For instance, see the fanciful account of Bob Dylan's youth that appeared in the liner notes of his debut album *Bob Dylan* (1962).
12. Co-writing *This Is Spinal Tap* were Michael McKean, Rob Reiner and Harry Shearer. For *Waiting for Guffman* and *A Mighty Wind*, Eugene Levy shares the writing credit with Guest.
13. The critic Philip Auslander describes a performance analysis of popular music which distinguishes between "the real person (the performer as human being) [and] the performance persona (the performer's self-presentation" (2006: 4). But, in Guest's films, the real person is replaced by a fictional character. Thus there is an added layer of performance.
14. See Auslander's excellent discussion of the outrage and confusion caused by folk artist Phil Ochs's 1970 performance at New York's Carnegie Hall in a gold lamé suit, à la Elvis Presley (9-38).
15. Race and gender also figure largely as authenticating markers, as Gates (1991: 26-30) and Auslander (2006:150-226) attest.
16. In much different contexts, Woody Allen's fake documentary *Zelig* (1983) addresses similar questions by using the narrative conceit of Leonard Zelig's mysterious medical condition.
17. "The rockumentary, like most documentary, is an inherently nostalgic genre which posits a retrieval of the pretextual" (Sarchett 1994: 31).
18. Corky St. Clair is the catalyst but unlike Marty DiBergi, his character does not assume a filmmaker's role; characters address a listener who is off-camera. This more distant, "objective" approach is also used in *A Mighty Wind*.
19. This community is ultimately, according to Elaine Bradtke (1995), "a fictional place, concocted from nationalist and utopian theories and salted with nostalgia" (500).
20. Ironically, but perhaps fittingly, Gates' attribution of this theory to Samuel Goldwyn is also debatable. It has been variously attributed to Jean Giraudoux, Groucho Marx or George Burns, and remains a matter of dispute.
21. "Camp thus presupposes a *collective, ritual and performative existence*, in which it is the object itself to be set on a stage, being, in the process of campification, *subjected* (by the theatricalisation of its ruinous modes of production) and transvested" (Cleto 1999: 25). Cleto's *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* provides a thorough overview of the history and uses of camp.
22. "We should treasure the famous Wildean invitation—in 'The Critic as Artist'—to *rewrite history*" (Cleto 1999: 36).
23. *The Return of Spinal Tap* (1993), directed by a pseudonymous "Jim DiBergi" in an echo of *This is Spinal Tap*'s satire of Martin Scorsese as "Marty DiBergi," was also produced by Guest, and includes a real concert at Royal Albert Hall.
24. *Back From the Dead* (2009), released by A2M.

ABSTRACTS

Christopher Guest's fake documentaries about music are marketed as entertainment but they also raise serious questions about music history and the problem of authenticity. Working as a

collaborative writer, director and actor in *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), *Waiting for Guffman* (1996) and *A Mighty Wind* (2003), Guest has recast the "discourses of sobriety" as deadpan comedy. In the process, he challenges the traditional fact/fiction dichotomy and claims to authenticity. With attention to folk, rock and community theater genres, this article focuses on Guest's treatment of received narratives about music-making that are preoccupied by a quest for origins and a sense of home. The reality of such narratives is depicted as compromised, while performance, sometimes animated by a camp sensibility, offers a way forward.

Les documentaires fictifs de Christopher Guest sur la musique sont commercialisés comme des divertissements, mais ils soulèvent également de sérieuses questions sur l'histoire de la musique et la question de l'authenticité. Travaillant en tant que scénariste, réalisateur et acteur dans *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), *Waiting for Guffman* (1996) et *A Mighty Wind* (2003), Guest a transformé le « discours de la sobriété » en comédie où le comique est présenté avec le plus grand sérieux. Il remet en question la dichotomie traditionnelle entre réalité et fiction ainsi que les prétentions d'authenticité. Cet article s'intéresse aux poncifs sur les genres du folk, du rock et de la comédie musicale, mais aussi sur la création musicale comme un retour aux sources. Si la vérité de ces récits est présentée par Guest comme étant de façade, la performance, parfois inspirée par une sensibilité burlesque ou « *camp* », offre peut-être un chemin nouveau.

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Mots-clés: documentaire, mockumentaire, Guest Christopher, musique, histoire de la musique, authenticité, camp

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